

I am writing you with grave concerns about the new collective bargaining agreement between Western Washington University and the United Faculty of Western Washington University.

--- Governor Christine O. Gregoire

Yesterday, July 2nd, I received a letter from the Governor that elaborated on the nature of those grave concerns. That letter is available [here](#).

It is my experience that exchanges of letters accomplish little and, as I did last week, I will continue to seek an opportunity to explore these very important matters, face-to-face where mutual listening and learning are possible. However, now that what I treated as a private the letter has been shared with the media, I do have an obligation to speak to you, colleagues on the campus I am proud to be a part of. You deserve to know my thinking. And that being the spirit with which I have used “Bruce’s Blog” in the past, here goes.

First, I do want to acknowledge from firsthand personal experience, sitting in her office any number of times, that public higher education in the State of Washington has no greater supporter than Governor Gregoire. Her efforts have been heroic in seeking to protect brighter futures for our State as we have passed through very difficult times.

I also believe that the efforts of you, my Western colleagues, have been equally heroic as we have weather the same serious economic realities. I believe the recent contract is a fine example of precisely the kind of courage and leadership these difficult times demand.

First some facts:

- Western’s status as a premier undergraduate institution traces directly back to the caliber of faculty we are able to attract and retain.
- We recruit faculty in a national marketplace and must compete to retain them in the same marketplace. Four years ago, average faculty salaries at Western were well below those of peers. After four years of no raises, we now rank below two-thirds of other institutions of our type, few of which have Western’s reputation for excellence.
- How uncompetitive have our faculty salaries become? Tables with peer comparisons are available [here](#). But, let’s take it local. The average salaries for our faculty, by rank, are: lectures, \$37,409; Instructors, \$44,025; Assistant Professors, \$55,300, and Associate Professors, \$65,355. All are lower than the current average salary for a high school teacher in the Bellingham School District (\$66,468).
- It is the case that Western is out front in addressing this issue because we were the first to be required to negotiate a contract for the coming year. We are not alone in addressing the issue, though: for example, at another state

baccalaureate institution, step increases in the existing contract allowed them to address equally serious faculty compensation issues while, for four years, we provided no raises. And, when contract timing required us to address the matter, we were not the outlier: for example, the figure we settled upon for the next academic year is less than the cumulative increases provided at that other institution.

Just what has been the leadership direction at Western?

The budgetary challenges we have been through as a State have, indeed, been daunting, and it is true that, over the past 4 years, few if any states have slashed public baccalaureate education to the extent our state has chosen to do.

How, on the campus, do we deal with those challenges? The Governor provided us with very clear direction: protect core functions, make the hard choices, avoid the easy road of across-the-board cuts, figure out new ways of doing business. That is exactly how we have proceeded.

Our core mission is simple: “to apply Western’s considerable strengths to help address the critical needs of the State of Washington.” Those considerable strengths trace directly to the caliber of the faculty who are responsible for our wide recognition as a premier undergraduate institution attracting 14,000 applications for 3,500 slots, as an institution whose graduates are widely sought by Washington employers, and as an institution where, for example, our applicants to the outstanding University of Washington Medical School, are admitted at rates twice as high as those characterizing other highly regarded institutions.

The common denominator in delivering on our mission of serving Washington: dedication to excellence in all we do. And, that depends critically upon the excellence of our faculty.

Our capacity to deliver on that excellence was marginal four years ago as faculty compensation was well below that of peers. The problem has become much worse over the last four years, four years of no raises.

Was the State of Washington in any position to address this serious matter? Would it be in the foreseeable future? We had to make certain planning assumptions. Again, following the Governor’s budgetary guidance – and the clear priorities of our Board of Trustees – we began, two years ago, to build in an institutional capacity to partially address the challenge. We went about the process of doing business differently and making hard choices driven by core mission. We called it “rebasings” and, by making hard cuts and doing things differently, we secured a capacity to address our highest priorities without having to further raise tuition.

This was open, transparent, and clear throughout our on-campus strategic budgeting processes, and I never overlooked opportunities to address the looming threat of uncompetitive faculty salaries in speeches, in media interviews, in public

forums, in legislative offices, and (joined by my colleague presidents) in the Governor's office.

Have we undermined support for the Governor's efforts?

Real leadership, it seems to us, is to make the tough calls. And then explaining them. Opinion leaders around the state really do get it in my experience. But, certainly, there are those in the wider public who will see any salary increases for public employees as anathema. Does leadership require taking that as an immutable given? Or, do we work together to educate people on the undeniable link between the steps we must and our 100% commitment to the mission of serving their critical needs. The answer, I suppose, depends upon our estimate of the capacity of Washingtonians to listen and to grasp complex and difficult issues.

Have we abused institutional flexibility?

It may be, though, that those in the most public roles, while certainly having the vision and the commitment, simply do not have the degrees of freedom available to take the actions necessary to assure that Washington protects the investments it has made in the excellence of its public baccalaureate institutions. Then, it seems self-evident: the delegation of certain flexibility to Boards of Trustees is very wise. *And, the actions of Western's Board of Trustees is not a misuse of that flexibility but, rather, is an outstanding example of why it is essential.*

Is this about tuition versus faculty salaries?

Any effort to cast it as such strikes me as the most pernicious of the allegations I have heard in recent days. Anybody who understands anything about public higher education finance in Washington knows that state support has been cut in half, now constituting 14% of our overall budget. Tuition pays for 70% of the costs of instruction (direct instruction as well as everything else: heating the buildings, policy and safety,) So, whatever we choose to do is being paid for, largely, by tuition.

What matters, of course, is whether we are paying for the right things? Here, as I always I remain extremely proud of our students for they do not succumb to appeals to baser motives and do understand the nuances. In the article on the contract in our entirely independent student paper, the Western Front, the effort to address faculty salaries was praised even as the link to tuition was recognized.

And it does not end here

I wish it were only as simple as one contract. But, I must advise that the steps taken at Western (and at other campuses) make only slight progress in addressing the lack of competitiveness of faculty salaries and, hence, only begin to reduce our vulnerability in protecting the excellence of Washington's universities.

And, it does not end there. We have serious compensation issues involving our other staff. Only this morning I learned that we have lost almost every one of our

frontline mental health counselors over the last couple of months – all related to uncompetitive compensation. This is but one example but it particularly strikes home at Western for, last year, our campus community seriously grieved as we experienced the loss of three students who took their own lives.

So, there is no end of tough choices ahead. Our promise at Western is to forthrightly face those tough choices, driven by our clear mission and focusing upon what is best for Washington.

As with all my prior blogs, I welcome your thoughts and reactions. And, I look forward to further exploring these matters with our hard working and dedicated elected leaders.